

10 Best Practices for Writing a White Paper that Gets Results

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1. Don't make the white paper too long (or too short).

A four-page document may be easy to read, but it usually fails to provide sufficient information to aid in effective decision making. At the other end of the spectrum, long white papers (15-20 pages) can challenge the attention span of readers. A happy medium of 8-10 pages including illustrations (about 3000 words) provides sufficient space to cover a complex subject area in a readable length for most audiences. (In a notable exception to this recommendation, some highly technical audiences demand even more information, justifying a longer paper.)

2. Use the third person in the white paper.

While the pronouns “I” and “we” (first person) or “you” and “your” (second person) may seem friendly in a white paper at first blush, they actually may alienate the reader. Most white paper readers expect to gain useful, credible information in a professional business context. The casual tone of the first or second person is inconsistent with this expectation. Use of the third person is almost always a better choice for professional business writing.

3. Refrain from including marketing information about your product or service throughout the white paper.

In most cases, the goal of a white paper is to provide unbiased, objective information to educate and inform a target audience, and to demonstrate thought leadership. Adopting a marketing tone or incorporating marketing-oriented language in a white paper reduces the objectivity of the paper, thereby interfering with this goal.

White papers are not marketing collateral; they complement marketing collateral

However, using factual descriptions of products and services, and limiting these discussions to the second half or last third of the paper (e.g., after discussing business challenges, motivations, and best practices) supports this goal and enhances objectivity. Marketing collateral (e.g., brochures, case studies, flyers, data sheets, and similar documents) is the best place for marketing language. White papers are not marketing collateral; they *complement* marketing collateral.

4. Address business and technical audiences in separate white papers.

Business and technical audiences struggle with significantly different challenges, and seek quite different information about solutions. Their perspectives, as well as the language to which they respond, are often widely divergent. Hence, attempting to address both of these audiences in a single paper (sometimes called a “hybrid” white paper) is almost always significantly less effective than developing a separate paper for each type of audience. Most readers respond more positively when the information the paper provides is tailored to their particular needs, motivations, background, and objectives. Trying to develop one paper that addresses both audiences is unwieldy and inefficient, and often costly to rectify by eventually rewriting the paper in two versions.

5. Stick with the facts; avoid posing strong opinions or specifying required courses of action in a white paper.

Some writers believe that white paper readers welcome an opinionated approach. However, most business and technical decision makers (the primary audiences of white papers) are independent thinkers. They usually do not respond well to unsubstantiated opinions or instructions that they “must” implement a product or they “must” adopt a strategy. Stating facts, describing options and alternatives, and factually explaining the likely ramifications of various actions is likely to resonate better with the information seekers that read white papers. This latter approach demonstrates thought leadership most effectively. It provides readers with the information they seek so that they can make their own decisions.

Effective white papers provide readers with the information they seek so that they can make their own decisions.

6. Motivate readers by providing useful information, not by instilling fear, uncertainty, and doubt.

For thousands of years, humans have been highly motivated by fear. However, this does not mean that instilling fear, uncertainty, and doubt in readers’ minds is the optimal strategy for white papers. Most business and technical decision makers do not operate based on these emotions. Instead, they typically evaluate options to implement sound decisions, especially in situations with significant financial implications. Overly used predictions of “doom and gloom” may seem trite to sophisticated audiences. White paper readers usually prefer factual statements of the possible repercussions of various courses of action to aid them in their evaluations and decisions.

7. Include third-party information.

By synthesizing related information from various sources on a particular topic, a white paper can be a powerful resource for readers. Third parties (i.e., parties other than the author and reader) are excellent information sources, especially when they are relatively unbiased entities such as industry associations, regulatory bodies, government agencies, nonprofit entities, and analyst firms.

Weaving information from these sources into the content of the white paper also enhances credibility. Hence, this approach strengthens the white paper by supporting the author’s message and expertise.

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8. Consider the option of outsourcing white paper development.

Many companies outsource the writing of white papers because of the difficulties inherent in writing them in-house. In-house authors are often too close to their products and services to be able to write an objective white paper about them. Additionally, in-house personnel are often not skilled in the art of white paper writing, which results in ineffective papers. White paper development quality also usually suffers when in-house personnel try to find time in their schedules to develop the paper while continuing to perform their existing duties. A carefully selected outside writing firm can produce a high-quality white paper in a timely fashion without excessive use of in-house resources for interviews.

9. Consider hiring an agency, rather than a freelancer, to write your white papers.

Freelance writers can produce high-quality work and may be fairly inexpensive, but they lack the strategic advantages of agencies. Agencies usually employ multiple writers, thereby mitigating risk, providing broader coverage, and offering faster response times when business conditions call for quick action. Compared to freelancers, agencies can generally provide an ongoing, more consistent resource at-the-ready – a partner that allows businesses to communicate to target audiences consistently and effectively, in a timely fashion.

10. Don't try to find a subject matter expert to write your white papers.

Intimate knowledge of the subject of a white paper can actually be a detriment rather than an advantage. Long-time industry insiders can bring preconceived notions or opinions to a writing project that may bias the writing. Moreover, outdated opinions may no longer be valid. Conversely, a writer that has a proven ability to write effectively about a broad range of complex subjects brings a fresh approach to the writing task. A writer who is less familiar with the subject at hand is more likely to include pertinent information that an industry insider might not realize is important. Effective white paper writers have proven time and time again that the demonstrated abilities to review and quickly synthesize complex information from various sources, conduct efficient interviews, develop a concise outline, draft a compelling paper, and efficiently incorporate comments are more important to white paper creation than prior knowledge in a specific subject area.

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Special Bonus: Get the most out of your white papers; use them to inform other audiences too.

Organizations typically target white papers to a defined external audience, such as business decision makers in a specific industry, or technical decision makers that face a particular type of problem or need. However, organizations can also use white papers to educate and inform a broad array of secondary audiences. Even though the white papers are not primarily targeted to these additional groups, the papers remain an effective vehicle for conveying useful information to them. These audiences may include employees (e.g., sales forces, executives, legal personnel, and HR personnel), potential employees, contractors (e.g., PR firms, ad agencies), regulatory personnel, the media, analysts, and partners, including resellers, recruiters, suppliers, and investors.

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